

NEW GOSPEL OF WEALTH / THE FUTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

Good philanthropy needs government featuring Laura Arnold and Van Jones

Laura Arnold, co-chair of Arnold Ventures, explains why philanthropy needs good policy to scale solutions, and where change is most needed today. Moderated by Van Jones of REFORM Alliance.

This video is part of a collection of conversations with leaders, thinkers, and activists from philanthropy, business, the arts, tech, and beyond outlining bold visions for the future of philanthropy.

Transcript begins.

[Why good philanthropy needs government. Laura Arnold, co-chair, Arnold Ventures. A Latina woman with short bouncy black hair, wearing a black dress with gold accents and red lipstick. Van Jones, CEO, Reform Alliance. Host of “The Redemption Project”, and “The Van Jones Show”. A Black man with glasses wearing a navy blazer and navy polka dot shirt with jeans and black boots.]

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome Laura Arnold and Van Jones.

[applause]

VAN JONES: Laura Arnold, you have become one of the most impactful philanthropists—Arnold Ventures. You’ve decided to invest in policy. Why is policy the focus of your work?

LAURA ARNOLD: Policy change is the lever that is going to lead to sustainable change. The reason we became a policy foundation was that we very quickly realized that, you know, it’s not about education. You know, education isn’t about the schools. It’s about—it’s about poverty. It’s about healthcare. It’s about homelessness. It’s about social justice. It’s about opportunity. You know, it’s about all of these elements of the social fabric that are woven together to create the reality of what we live. And, in order to change that, in a sustainable way, you have to attack the systems that are creating the injustices that you see, that are creating the dysfunction that you see. And, and in my view, there’s no better way to do that than by getting in there and, first of all, discovering what it is that’s broken—understanding what elements you can fix and what solutions you think are superior alternatives to what’s happening, and getting those implemented and having the government adopt those systems as better alternatives.

VAN JONES: Yeah. Well, I mean, it is true that no matter what you do, the government always has more money than the foundations.

LAURA ARNOLD: That’s right.

VAN JONES: So if you can leverage it, you can make a lot more change. But what you just described is hard.

LAURA ARNOLD: Yeah!

VAN JONES: You've said, "Oh, we'll do this and this and this"—that's really really hard.

LAURA ARNOLD: That's right!

VAN JONES: And you've also decided to do it in one of the hardest areas—criminal justice reform. So, you make the decision, first you're going to do policy. You're going to try to move the government, and then in this tough area. Why did you focus on criminal justice? Why is that so important to you?

LAURA ARNOLD: I'm a lawyer by training. So, uh, in addition to education, when we started looking at broken systems, which is what we're attracted to—you know, we both come—both my husband and I come from a private-sector background. So we, so we look for sort of, you know, inefficient markets, broken systems—things that, uh—where we believe that philanthropy can create a better alternative. And you don't have to look very far to understand that, you know, that criminal justice is a deeply broken system from, really, every respect. And I need not tell the audience every way in which it's broken, because many of us, uh, in the audience live it, work in this space, and deeply understand and are fighting every day to right those injustices. But whether or not you take a civil rights perspective, a civil liberties perspective, to the issue of criminal justice or whether you look at it from a cost-benefit lens—understanding the massive, massive waste of resources that, um, that we see in our criminal justice system, you see that it's so—it's a system that is senselessly broken. So, so we started about 12 years ago, looking into what aspects of the system do we think that we can change? What aspects do we think are not only broken but are able to be singled out, such that we can really make a short-term impact that could evolve into something that's, um, that is long-lasting? And that's how we started looking at pretrial work and bail reform and um, and that's how we began that journey.

VAN JONES: The thing that's the most striking about you, besides your incredibly rigorous and really singular approach, frankly, in the area of criminal justice, is you and your husband. Why are you doing this?

LAURA ARNOLD: You know, I think, this sort of constant feeling of just being blessed by the resources that we have, by the opportunities that have been given to us, and by the platform that we have to really create good. And not just, you know, not just for the world, which is incredibly, you know, meaningful, but also, you know, for us as people, to set the right example for our children, to, you know, to really leave the world in a better place than how we found it. In our case, you know, we don't have a business. Uh, you know, we don't have a brand to protect. We can do—we can face whatever criticism we want. It's a position of luxury, where you can put yourself out there and have the hard conversation, engage in the tough fight, and do what you think is right, because it's right, without having to counterbalance it, you know, with any—you know, with your personal interests, with your financial interests, with your, you know, whatever

else. And so we think that that's our market advantage and that's what drives us to do what we do.

VAN JONES: It's great. It's great what you do. It's great the way that you do it. You challenge this field. You've transformed this field. You're not going to have a bunch of Arnold Centers, but you're going to have a whole lot of people walking around free because of what you've done, and we appreciate it.

LAURA ARNOLD: Well, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[applause]

[New gospel of wealth. What does #GenerosityToJustice look like to you? Ford Foundation dot org forward slash new gospel.]

End of transcript.